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PHILIP HANDLER DIES AFTER LONG ILLNESS

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

WASHINGTON - Philip Handler, one of the most distinguished leaders of American science, and for 12 years president of the National Academy of Sciences, died Tuesday morning (Dec. 29) less than six months after he retired as the 18th president of the Academy. He died at New England Deaconess Hospital in Boston, where he had been undergoing treatment since August. The cause of death was lymphoma complicated by pneumonia.

In October, he was awarded the National Medal of Science in a bedside ceremony attended by George A. Keyworth, II, science adviser to President Reagan, and Frank Press, who succeeded Dr. Handler as president of the Academy. A citation signed by President Reagan honored Dr. Handler: "For his outstanding contributions to biochemical research, resulting in significant contributions to mankind, including research that led to a clearer understanding of pellagra, and for his national leadership in furthering the state of American science."

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He is survived by his wife, Lucille, of Durham, N.C.; two sons, Mark, also of Durham, and Eric Paul, of Greensboro; two grandchildren; and a brother, Melvin, of New York City. Cremation will take place in Boston and interment at Duke University. Memorial services are being planned by the Academy and other institutions with which Dr. Handler was associated.

In notifying the members of the Academy, Dr. Press wrote: "Phil was a close personal friend and mentor and counselor in my university and governmental careers. I shall greatly miss his friendship and his wisdom."

Born August 13, 1917, Dr. Handler received the B.S. degree from the College of the City of New York in 1936 and the Ph.D. from the University of Illinois in 1939. He accepted an instructorship at Duke University that same year and spent his entire teaching career at that institution. After he left Duke to become president of the Academy in 1969, he remained James B. Duke Professor of Biochemistry.

Dr. Handler distinguished himself in several careers. As a biochemist, he published more than 200 papers in important professional journals. He early recognized the value of metabolic research to human welfare. One of his first major research efforts was on the underlying problems that cause pellagra, a vitamin B deficiency disease. He also made many other fundamental contributions to understanding the mechanisms by which enzyme proteins carry out their catalytic functions in metabolism.

His research produced the only available description, in chemical terms, of the natural history of nicotinic acid deficiency. This led in turn to his discovery of the tryptophan-nicotinic acid relationship. Handler demonstrated the oxidation of sarcosine to glycine and formaldehyde, thereby initiating the understanding of single-carbon atoms in metabolism. Handler's further work proved that methionine is the unique methyl donor of metabolism and that there is no pool of methyl groups.

His most influential role in his field of specialty, however, may have been as one of the authors of Principles of Biochemistry, now in its sixth edition and a standard textbook in most medical schools.

As a scientific leader, he not only brought the Duke University Department of Biochemistry to the front ranks of such research institutions, but also exercised national leadership in strengthening the scientific enterprise. He served on several advisory committees of the National Science Foundation, and, later, 12 years on the National Science Board, culminating as its chairman, 1966-70. He also served two terms on the President's Science Advisory Committee, from 1964 to 1972, on the President's Commission on Heart Disease, Cancer, and Stroke (1964-65), and on the President's Commission for a National Agenda for the Eighties (1979-81). In addition, he served on several central committees of the National Institutes of Health and was instrumental in helping to bring into being the National Institute of General Medical Sciences.

He has been the recipient of numerous awards and 23 honorary doctorates. Among many such honors, he was Annual Orator of the Harvey Cushing Society and of the Welch Foundation, Sigma Xi National Lecturer, and delivered memorial lectures at many scientific institutions in the U.S. and abroad. He served on the boards and visiting committees of more than a dozen scientific institutions and has been decorated by the governments of Austria, Belgium, and Poland.

Dr. Handler made no secret of the intense gratification he derived from his 12 years as president of the Academy. To the Academy Council, at a dinner in his honor, he said, "I have had an absolutely glorious time... Opportunities for service which are at the same time warm, loving, rich experiences are very rare. I have been very fortunate and deeply, highly privileged by all of you. Thank you ever so much."

When Dr. Handler in 1969 began his first term as Academy president, he brought with him a plan to reorganize the National Research Council, which had been since 1916 the principal mechanism within the Academy for performing studies on behalf of the federal government. With the guidance of a committee of academicians, Dr. Handler's reorganization plan provided concrete results: (1) it enlarged the Research Council's capacity for service, (2) it insured that no studies would be accepted without the prior review of distinguished authorities in the field, and (3) it guaranteed that the work performed would be in accordance with sound scientific principles.

At the same time, he brought into being a Report Review Committee, the purpose of which was to insure that the completed studies responded to the original charges to them and that their conclusions and recommendations were germane to the scientific evidence provided.

He performed many services on behalf of fellow scientists suffering harassment from repressive regimes. These activities began early in his 12-year presidency, first in persistent but quiet diplomacy with his counterparts in the Soviet Union and other countries and eventually through the news media. Although he sought to intercede personally on behalf of a number of foreign colleagues, his major efforts were directed toward the protection of Andrei Sakharov, a distinguished physicist and foreign associate of the Academy.

Dr. Handler and his wife worked to bring about a congenial relationship between the Academy and the broader Washington community -- in the lively arts and humanities as well as the natural sciences. An Arts-in-the-Academy program was begun, initially supported by honoraria Dr. Handler turned over to a special fund, that brought works of art to the Academy in temporary exhibitions or as additions to the Academy's own collection. A monumental statue of Albert Einstein, erected by the Academy on its own grounds at Dr. Handler's initiative, has become an objective of tourists and Washingtonians alike.

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